

A Worthwhile Podcast Episode Entitled: " Hume, The Epicureans, And the Origins of Liberalism"

Post by "Cassius" of April 29, 2024 at 2:30 PM

Below is a link that was posted on the Facebook group by one of the participants there. I have now listened to the podcast, which is an interview by [Annika Nordquist](#) with a professor by the name of [Aaron Zubia](#), and in general I am very pleased with it. Of course there are some issues that deserve criticism, but here's my general take, which is very positive:

Despite the title, the podcast does not get into modern partisan politics, and the "origins of liberalism" is a reference much more to "modern classical liberalism" than to the partisan kind. The podcast is a very literate discussion focusing on Hume, but really talking almost as much about Epicurus as anything else. The interviewer and the interviewee both sound very academic, and they treat Epicurus fairly to the extent their religious presumptions allow them. The limitation on my endorsement is that it is clear that both interviewer and interviewee are traditional Christians, and so they have to tone down their praise of Epicurus even when they evidently agree with him. Except for some minor comments about people like Jordan Peterson at the end of the podcast, where it becomes clear that they will never endorse Hume or Epicurus, likely because of their religious presuppositions, both parties on the podcast are obviously impressed by Epicurus. I think that in general this would be a better introduction to Epicurus' work than most any generalist podcast I have heard in a long time. It covers issues like "virtue," the criticism of Socrates, criticism of Stoicism, the basis of empiricism, the "apikoros" issue involving Jewish thought, and lots of issues that don't often get discussed in generalist podcasts.

I was a little disappointed in the professor's defense of Epicurus' view of the senses, as the interviewer asked one of the frequent questions about how Hume, or Epicurus, could put trust in the senses when there's illusions and stuff. The professor didn't go into how error is in the mind and not in the sensations, but if I recall the answer he gave was decent enough, and I don't recall that then or ever did the professor criticize Epicurus or make him sound naive or obsolete.

In fact the main take-away I got from the episode, who is devoting a lot of his emphasis to Hume, is clearly persuaded by many of the opinions of Epicurus (and Hume), and that he would agree with most all of them but for that stubborn refusal to let go of Jerusalem and Judeo-Christianity, which became clear at the end of the episode. However all in all I think this podcast episode is well worth the time to listen.

You might want to give it until about the seven or eight minute mark for the conversation to turn to Epicurus, and in retrospect I am shocked that they managed to have the entire discussion without once - to my recollection - mentioning Thomas Jefferson! And his name cried out for mention when they started discussing "head" vs "heart" and they did not mention Jefferson's "Head and Heart" letter where Jefferson clearly sides with Epicurus, nor did they mention any of Jefferson's letters supporting Epicurus. Both interviewer and interviewee appear to be "Madisonians" so they aren't predisposed to depart from their "Madisonian" traditionalism, but you can hear in their voices that they are surprised how much good they are finding in Epicurus!

I myself have done very little reading in Hume, and this podcast makes me want to find that time to correct that oversight.

<https://youtu.be/k6IOBN4N3DI?>

Post by “Cassius” of May 1, 2024 at 10:46 AM

Followup discussion to [the post at the Facebook Group](#). This first YT post was in response to my post over there which was a slightly modified version of what I posted in post 1 above. There is also other conversation there but this is probably the most relevant to repost.

YT: Cassius That was pretty much my take on it as well. I also thought it was somewhat off the mark to describe Jonathan Haidt as conservative, but that was just a minor issue. Might be worth trying to get him as a guest on Lucretius Today to flesh out these questions about tradition vs naturalism, Epicurus, Jefferson and Madison.

JB: YT I don't think there would be anything gained by having this person as a guest on Lucretius Today. Perhaps I might want to know if he believed that there was a god who was watching his every move. Epicurus had the right answer to this!

Cassius Amicus: Yes the possibility of inviting him to our Epicurus podcast is definitely something to consider, but at present my thoughts are more like John's. I definitely found the professor - and the interviewer - to be likeable and intelligent and easy to listen to, but I suspect that the "Madison" orientation would invite more confrontation on religion than it would illumination as to Hume or Bentham or the rest. They might well be uncomfortable appearing on an explicitly "Epicurean" podcast with there being no way to bridge those deeper issues.

But I did find it remarkable to listen to them talk to each other and both seem to appreciate that there is more to Epicurus than meets the eye, and even when he disagreed with Epicurus the professor gave Epicurus credit for being the real "architect" of this position in the ancient

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3829-a-worthwhile-podcast-episode-entitled-hume-the-epicureans-and-the-origins-of-lib/>

world, and deserving of far more credit for his influence than he is given.

The professor's remarks to the effect that Epicurean theory of pleasure is too "light" (my word) to sustain a full moral theory is a common problem with lots of commentators, because they focus on the stimulative pleasures and then stumble over the "absence of pain" statements as essentially unintelligible, so they move on.

One day we're going to be able to make the case better that "absence of pain" is not a dark phrase but simply means all experiences of life, including all normal and healthy physical and mental existence, which are not explicitly painful. This formulation is clearly visible in Cicero's presentation of Epicurean ethics where Torquatus is explaining it, even giving examples such as the proper reply to Chrysippus' "hand" argument, but that kind of detail has simply not penetrated the orthodox distaste for "pleasure" as a term.

I'd like to think that there is a younger generation that is immune to that older orthodoxy, and immune to the gloss-over that's been given to Epicurus, and that unpolluted attitude is what I hear in the voices of both the interviewer and the professor. They seem mystified that Epicurus has been given so little credit for his influence, and if they stick with the study long enough (and if they aren't so firmly in the grip of religion) then there's good reason for hope that new attitudes will eventually prevail.